



Januar / Siječanj 2016 – January 2016

Tatjana Debeljački vs. Ram Krishna Singh

1. Can you tell us something about your hometown and growing up?

Thanks for getting in touch with me, Tatjana. I come from a humble family of Banares, now Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. (Recently, it has been in the news for being the constituency of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visit of dignitaries from various countries, including the Prime Minister of Japan.) For generations my forefathers had lived in the narrow lanes and alleys of the ancient city, and I, too, was born, nrought up and educated there, partaking of a culture which flourished on the bank of the Ganges that still attracts everyone, though the uniqueness is gone, values, norms, beliefs and body politic have changed so much that whenever I go home I find myself out of place.

As my grandfather was a freedom fighter, frequently imprisoned along with other Congress Party leaders in Banares, my father could not have formal

education. He learnt to survive by himself, learnt to read and write and did many petty jobs before he could settle down in life as an accountant. He recognized the value of education. I was the eldest of his eight children who are all postgraduates and/or doctorates and fiercely independent in their views and thinking. When I was hardly ten or so, my father ensured that during the summer vacation I should learn some skills and earn too. I learnt typewriting and worked part-time as a typist during the 1960s. The skill later helped me type my postgraduate and doctoral dissertations, and manuscripts of several of my books and academic articles for publication.

Though I started my career as a journalist, I switched over to teaching, finding it more congenial, and now, away from my roots in the interiors of Varanasi, I have been living in Dhanbad since February 1976. It is here, after joining Indian School of Mines as a faculty, that I was married in 1978, blessed with two children (who are now well settled, my son is Colonel in the Army, and my daughter is Manager in a pharmaceutical company), and I have been able to establish myself as an academic, and perhaps, poet too.

2. When did you start to write and what inspires you?

In the early 1960s, I think. I remember writing my first poem at the age of 12 in 1962. The poem appeared in a Hindi daily, *Aj*, of Varanasi. My interest and enthusiasm never waned since then: I dabbled in several poems and published in newspapers and magazines. From 1965 to 1972, I even participated in a few 'Kavi Sammelans' (Poets' meet) also. I had adopted 'Tahira' as my pen name in Hindi. I remember I used to do a column 'Tahira ki Kalam Se' (From the Pen of Tahira) in a Hindi weekly. I also published over 150 journalistic articles as well as about ten short stories in Hindi till about 1971-72. As I became aware that my articles were more popular than my poems, from 1968-69, I started writing in English as well,

and produced a large number of third-rate verses. Probably the first poem in English composed in 1968 appeared in the Deutsche Welle radio magazine. A couple of my early poems also appeared in *Adam & Eve* (Madras). It was a great feeling to have been paid for those poems.

My teachers in Banaras Hindu University, where I was a student of M.A. (English Literature) from 1970-72, dissuaded me from writing poems in English but I persisted in my efforts at developing the art and craft in keeping with my sensibility, and I am happy to discover that what I could not do in Hindi (which is indeed now very advanced and comparable with literature in any other language) I have been successful in doing in English.

Before I try to answer the other part of your question, what inspires me to write, let me look back to my writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the influence of the Romantic, Victorian and Modern poets in English waned, this phase of preparation was completed with my attempt at writing my 'diary' in verses from October 1972 to December 1973. My encounter in 1971-72 with the poetry of an American poet-professor, Lyle Glazier, had a shaping influence on my poetic sensibility. There was a lot to say after leaving the monotonous life at Varanasi and moving to Pulgaon (Wardha, Maharashtra), returning again and visiting several places in search of a job (1972-73), moving to Lucknow (1973), New Delhi (1973-74), and finally to Bhutan, where from March 1974 to November 1975, I lived in the lap of Nature and composed almost a poem a day. I experienced not only peace in the beautiful Himalayan kingdom but also found the required dimension to my poetry and personality. I had plenty of free time and I could dream, feel and think.

But soon loneliness began to haunt me and I started hunting for a change. I came to Dhanbad in February 1976 and lost my peace in the whirlwind to teacher activism, academic research, and uncertainties of all sorts. My psyche was disturbed, but it was in the mounting tensions that I could

perform my best: I wrote my PhD thesis, and later published it as *Savitri: A Spiritual Epic* (1984). Intermittently poetry and sex came as a relief.

For many years, my dreamt dreams, personal experiences with people, reading good writing, or seeing good painting (or work of art), have inspired my creativity. Some part is also played by the completely demotivating environment of campus life in Dhanbad. Now any small, negligible aspect of one's behavior or attitude, any insignificant event, anything, including sexual experience, can inspire me if it expresses 'momentness of a moment' or become an imagery. Even something read or heard in the past may get connected with something Now and incite me into a poem.

I am also inspired by human body which is the best picture of the human soul: I glorify it. We are flesh in sensuality and there is divinity in it. It is ever refreshing to me to express love and sex, the internalized substitute, or antidote to the fast dehumanizing existence without and ever in conflict with my search for life. It helps me enlarge my self to the universal sameness of human feeling.

3. When did you publish your first book and how did the success follow later?

As I said, *Savitri: A Spiritual Epic*, an exploration of Sri Aurobindo's massive epic in English, *Savitri* (1950) for PhD, was my first book published by Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly (U.P.), India in 1984. Krishna Srinivas (1913-2007), editor and publisher of the *Poet*, an international monthly and recipient of Padmabhushan award (2004), was so impressed by it that he requested me to do a critical essay on his poetry and sent me all his books. I ended up doing a monograph *Krishna Srinivas: The Poet of Inner Aspiration*, which he published from his Poets Press India, Madras in 1984.

He also gave me the much needed break by publishing free of cost my first collection of poems, *My Silence*, in 1985. I also edited with an introduction a collection of articles on his poetry, *Sound and Silence*, published in 1986. There has been no looking back since then. I have published almost a book a year. These include 16 poetry collections, 13 English language related books, and 11 Indian English literature related books. In addition, I have published over 160 academic articles and over 170 book reviews. My poems and articles have also been anthologized in over 180 publications. (For details, pl. visit <http://profksinghlistofpublications.blogspot.in>)

4. Poems Have Been Translated Into National And International Languages?

Yes, some of my poems have been translated into Indian languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Bangla, Kannada and Punjabi, and foreign languages such as French, Spanish, Romanian, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Serbian, Croatian, Slovene, Bulgarian, Italian, German, Portuguese, Greek, Farsi, Arabic, Albanian, Crimean Tatar, and Esperanto.

5. A reviewer, critic and contemporary poet who writes in Indian English, university professor with active interest in poetry and English language interview?

Perhaps, you mean to say English language teaching? Yes, professionally I have been concerned with English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially for science and technology for about three decades. Working at Indian School of Mines, a technical university, I initiated 'need-based' English language teaching to the undergraduate and post graduate students of earth and mineral sciences and engineering, even as personally I have been

practicing poetry, besides reviewing and/or critiquing new voices, ignored by the media and academia alike.

6. Haiku followers, one important reason may lie in the power of kigo?

That's why Gabi Greve devoted several years preparing a list of 'kigo' words from different countries, cultures and societies, including India.

Haiku is a difficult genre to practice. To me, it's a spiritual exercise, helping one to pursue what is true, fulfilling and joyous. It took me several years to compose publishable haiku with native experiences. Though brevity has been a prominent feature of my regular poems from *My Silence* onwards, and I attempted many poems with 'haiku' stanzas, but genuine haiku with Indian kigo started happening much later.

7. With the reader who is also a poet, especially a haiku poet, such effects can generate and offer fresh experiences of the?

Sameness in differences? The snapshots of our living experiences provide a sort of balance by other aspects – nature, time, seasons, trees, birds, flowers, festivals, urban chaos, new technological developments, in short, all that we see, feel or know. We look outside to communicate the inside, the perception response, the vision, you know. It's a sort of continual dialogue within vis-à-vis the life and world we experience without; it's an inner communication, a process of self-discovery, a spiritual experience, as I said. After this, there is only silence, the briefest haiku.

“in silence/one with the divine will/growing within”

“on the river's bank/his soul is lighted for peace--/lantern in the sky”

“squatting/in the middle of the field/a woman with child”

“awake/alone on the house top/a sparrow”

“hitching up the skirt/she fills her pockets with unripe mangoes”

“pigeons fly/for shelter through smoke--/blazing windows”

“wiping his face/under the umbrella/an old man with books”

8. What can you tell us about your work, prizes, journeys and friendships?

With the arrival of Internet, it became easier to reach out to audiences in different countries. Otherwise it was only through the snail mail I could contact editors and haiku practitioners. The editors and publishers of *Azami* (Osaka), *SGL* (USA), *The Tanka Journal* (Japan), *Ko* (Japan), *Prophetic Voices* (USA), *Micropress Yates* (Australia), *Micropress NZ* (New Zealand), *Noreal* (France), *Kanora* (Columbia), *Manxa* (Spain), *Vrabac/Sparrow* (Croatia), *HQ Poetry Magazine* (UK), *La Pierna Tierna* (USA), *Forum* (New Zealand), *Poet* (Madras/Chennai), *Creative Forum* (New Delhi), *Poetcrit* (Himachal Pradesh), *Asahi Shimbun* (Japan), *Paper Wasp* (Australia), *Simply Words* (USA), *Haiku Novine* (Yugoslavia/Croatia), *At Last* (Scotland), *Mirrors* (Canada), *The Haiku Quarterly* (UK), *Lynx* (USA) and scores of other poetry journals supported my creative efforts in the beginning. Friends such as H.F. Noyes (Greece), Mohammed H. Siddiqui (USA), Patricia Prime (New Zealand), Angelee Deodhar (Chandigarh), Dejan Bogojevic, Marijan Cekolj, Zoran Doderovic, Ruth Wildes Schuler (USA) and others actively helped me understand the warp and woof of haiku and helped me reach out. My academic commitments won't let me travel to attend haiku poets meet in India or outside, but friends and well-wishers have been helpful.

Though my collections, *My Silence* (1985), *Memories Unmemoried* (1988), *Music Must Sound* (1990), *Flight of Phoenix* (1990), and *Above the Earth's Green* (1997) contain many 'micropoems', including haiku and tanka, *Every Stone Drop Pebble* (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1999, jointly with Catherine Mair and Patricia Prime) is my first haiku collection. *Pacem in Terris* (Trento: Edizioni Universum, 2003, a trilogy collection of poems in English and Italian) includes my second haiku collection, *Peddling Dream*, translated into Italian by Giovanni Campisi. *The River Returns* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2006) is my next collection including both haiku and tanka. I collected all the previously published books and new poems, along with haiku, tanka and sequences in *Sense and Silence: Collected Poems* (2010). The volumes that followed it include *New and Selected Poems Tanka and Haiku* (2012), *I am No Jesus and Other Selected Poems, Tanka and Haiku*, with translation into Crimean Tatar by Taner Murat (2014) published by Editura StudIS (Romania), and most recently *You Can't Scent Me and Other Selected Poems* (New Delhi: AuthorsPress, 2016), which includes most of my new poems and some haiku and tanka sequences.

I must admit haiku and tanka practice helped me register my international presence just as awards and honors such as Ritsumeikan University Peace Museum Award, Kyoto 1999, Certificate of Honor and Nyuusen Prize in Kumamoto International Kusamamoto Haiku Competition, Japan, 2000 and 2008, Special Award Diogen, 2013, Nazar Look Prize for Poetry, Romania, 2013, Nomination for Pushcart Prize 2013, 2014, Naji Naaman's Literary Prize, Lebanon, 2015, Honorable Mention in 68th Basho Festival, 2014 and Grand Prize in 69th Basho Festival, 2015 have been gratifying.

9. Do you think you have outwitted the expectations?

Hopefully, I have communicated well enough to last for a longer time, at least in India, as an Indian English poet. I do expect an academic exploration of my poetry for higher degrees (like MA/MPhil/PhD) with learned articles in journals at home and abroad. I'm afraid the media and academia in the country have ignored me despite my four decades of writing and publishing.

10. How do you manage all that with so much work that you do? Do you have time for yourself?

Simply, I didn't waste my time, doing nothing. I used every minute of my free time. My wife managed the home front, leaving me free to do the academic and other work in the institution. My children didn't bother me for tuition etc. Poetry happened anywhere anytime. Publishers too showed interest in my writing for its novelty. Things were smooth that way.

Now that I am retired, I would like to do certain things I could not, for want of professional commitments, like research and teaching. Now I would like to live for myself for a change. Let's see how things shape up.

11. Is there anything that you could pinpoint and tell us about yourself between the dream and reality?

First, I never wanted to be a teacher and I became one. Second, I didn't want to work or stay in Dhanbad and I had not only my career in Dhanbad for over four decades but I also had to settle down here post-retirement. And, finally, the way my father and sisters treated me, my wife and children, we

could not forget, though we have forgiven them all. We all seek familial affection among strangers!

12. What are your plans for the future creative work?

To publish a volume of letters received as editor, reviewer, poet, writer, or academic from persons I never met but who reflected on my work, relationship, decisions etc whereby some aspects of my mind, creativity or personality can be gleaned. It is intended as a memoir and tentatively, I've called it 'Through Their Eyes: A Memoir'.

13. Have you achieved everything you have ever wanted to and if you could live your life again would you be an artist again?

I have been a restless soul, very impatient, and hardly contented. Though I notice a decline in my mental faculty—my forgetting is faster than remembering, as I said once earlier, I think poetry, especially haiku and tanka, will continue to happen, and one day I will be recognized for what I have done as a poet. I already achieved the highest for my work as a practitioner of ELT/EST. No doubt, I would love to be born again as an artist.

14. Is there anything you would like to say that you think is important and that I haven't asked you ?

Can't say at the moment. I have already spoken too much in response to what you asked.

15. It was a great pleasure talking to you and you are always welcome to our house "Diogen pro culture" magazine.

Many thanks for your probing questions. It's been a great pleasure talking to you. I value your support.



BIO:

Ram Krishna Singh, born, brought up and educated in Varanasi (U.P., India), has been writing poetry in English for about four decades. He has published over 160 academic articles, 175 book reviews, and 17 collections of poems, including the latest *I Am No Jesus And Other Selected Poems, Tanka And Haiku* (English/Crimean Tatar, 2014), *New And Selected Poems Tanka And Haiku* (2012), *Sense And Silence: Collected Poems* (2010), and *You Can't Scent Me and Other Poems* (2016).

Appreciated for his tanka and haiku, Dr. Singh's poems have been anthologized in over a hundred books. His poems have been translated into Japanese, Greek, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Hungarian, Albanian, Crimean Tatar, Bulgarian, Slovene, Irish, Croatian, Farsi, Arabic, Serbian, Bosnian, Esperanto, Hindi, Punjabi, Kannada, Tamil, and Bangla. A member of several literary bodies and editorial boards, nominated for Pushcart Prize 2013 and 2014, and winner of Ritsumeikan University Peace Museum Award, Kyoto, 1999, Certificate of Honour and Nyuusen Prize in Kumamoto International Kusamamoto Haiku Competition, Japan, 2000 and 2008, Nazar Look Prize for Poetry, Romania, 2013, Prize of Corea Literature, Seoul, 2013, and Naji Naaman's Literary Prize, Lebanon, 2015, Dr. Singh recently retired as Professor (HAG) at Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad 826004 (India).

More at: www.rksinghpoet.blogspot.in

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